

**Testimony of Robert D. Toonkel**  
In Support of House Bill 5633  
May 9, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify regarding House Bill 5633, legislation that would make English the official language of Michigan.

My name is Rob Toonkel, and I am Director of Communications for U.S. English, Inc., a grassroots organization based in Washington, DC. U.S. English was founded in 1983 by then-Senator S.I. Hayakawa, who was himself an immigrant and we have now grown to over a million members, including more than 35,000 in Michigan. Our organization focuses on public policy issues that involve language and national identity, particularly official English laws.

Mr. Chairman, U.S. English is lead by an immigrant, Mauro E. Mujica, who is a naturalized citizen from Chile. One third of U.S. English members are either immigrants or the children of immigrants. A Zogby poll last summer found that 79 percent of Americans favor a law to make English our nation's official language, but the support among first and second-generation immigrants was 81 percent. In both its motivations and content, this is a pro-immigrant bill.

While there is certainly a need for government to occasionally operate in other languages, that need must be balanced by a legitimate insistence that immigrants are on the road to learning English. That balance is embodied in HB 5633, which requires that routine government operations be in English, while listing a number of exceptions where multilingual operations may make sense.

In a state whose residents speak 125 languages, multilingual government should be the exception, not the rule. Unfortunately, instead of promoting English learning, government agencies around the country increasingly seek to cater to immigrants in as many languages as possible. My boss is a 40 year resident of the United States, but he tells that he can walk into virtually any government office and because his name is "Mauro Mujica," the person behind the counter will assume that he needs service in Spanish. This was not the case for immigrants who came to this country 50 or 100 years ago.

But don't just take my word for it. In researching his book "Translation Nation," former Los Angeles Times reporter Hector Tobar traveled throughout the country, and concluded that modern communications technology and legitimate customer service goals have created large areas all around the country where it is entirely possible to live an English free existence. This a first in American history. Now candidly, Mr. Tobar generally views this as a *positive* development. But his diagnosis of the situation is exactly the same as mine.

If we were just talking about new immigrants who merely did not speak English *yet*, that may not be cause for concern. But unfortunately, the best available data suggest that the state of limited English proficiency is frequently terminal. To take but one example, last March the Pew Hispanic Center surveyed Mexican migrants on many matters, including English proficiency. Pew found that among those residing in the United States for 6-10

years, 45 percent did not speak English. Pew also found that among those residing in the U.S. for 15 or more years, 45 percent *still* do not speak English. In other words, if you don't start on the path to English soon after arrival, chances are high that you will never learn it.

Now let me talk about specifically the state of language learning in Michigan: first, although we often think of English and Spanish, the numbers from Census 2000 inform us that there are 125 languages spoken at home by residents of the state. Michigan is the only state in the nation where Arabic is the third most common language spoken, and one of only four where Polish places in the top five. The Great Lakes State ranks first in the nation in the percentage of Arabic speakers, first in speakers of Syrian languages, second in Romanian, third in Albanian, and fifth in Bengali. It is a state of many languages, united by one common tongue – English.

Unfortunately, some cannot join in the common discussion. In all, near 300,000 of the state's residents do not meet the Census definition for English proficient. 130,000 of them speak English "not well" or "not at all." Most disturbing, almost 40,000 of these people at the lowest levels of English proficiency were born here in the United States.

Sadly, these statistics are only becoming more worrisome. Since 1990, the number of Michigan residents who speak little or no English has climbed by 90 percent. The number of linguistically isolated households, one where no member of the household over the age of 14 can speak English very well, is up 50 percent. These are not signs of a state moving forward.

So Mr. Chairman, we are faced with two undeniable facts: first, there are many people living in America and living in Michigan who don't speak English well enough to dial 911 or read a voter guide, and who are not on the road to doing so. Second, our national aspiration is that these immigrants learn English and become Americans. There is a gap between our aspirations and reality, and I respectfully suggest that we need a policy to close that gap.

An emphasis on English would not be the first program where government leads people toward self-sufficiency and success. Unemployment and welfare programs provide a helping hand while the person makes a parallel effort to improve his/her situation.

Moreover, this policy follows in line with the existing messages government issues to maximize societal opportunity and health. From compulsory education laws to regulations on smoking, individual behavior is influenced for the benefit of society. It is reasonable to believe that on a matter that goes to the heart of our ongoing ability to assimilate immigrants, the legislature should have a say in the shape of the policy.

Let me give you two examples. When Iowa passed official English in 2002, it did not drive immigrants from the state. It did not end the speaking of German, Spanish or dozens of other languages. It did, however, usher in a new era, one where ESL funding increased, language and citizenship classes increased, and the state brought more people into the mainstream. In short, the government's emphasis on language set the entire state into action.

I see this push to action in my experience as an English as a second language teacher. Every semester, immigrants from all walks of life come to attend class, but their reason for coming follows the same sad tale – a child entering school, the inability to speak with a boss, being passed over for a promotion. How sad will the stories have to get before we act?

I want to preemptively address a common objection to this legislation. Some opponents of this darkly warn that English as the language of government laws will lead to general hostility to immigrants. But were that the case, we would expect that examples of such hostility could be found in at least some of the 27 states that have declared English official. This a prediction based on an empirically unsupported fear, and it is refuted by our national experience with official English laws.

Some have also claimed that is a quote “English Only” bill. This label is a factually incorrect way to describe the legislations operations and motivations. Operationally, as you see in the text of the bill, there are many exceptions to the English Rule. It is English most of the time, not English only.

But second, this label is used by opponents to imply that we are somehow against foreign languages. So let me be clear: the fact that Americans can speak addition languages is a strength and a source of pride. But it can only be strength if those people from many nations have a language in common. We believe that it’s a good idea for everyone to learn a 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> language. We have never been—and no serious person is suggesting that we become—an “English Only” nation. But we decidedly do not want to become an “English Optional” nation. In fact, a March poll of Michigan residents conducted by MRG Research found that 82 percent of state’s residents support the legislation in front of you today. In these days of closely divided opinion, I can hardly think of any measure that could and does unite so many.

If we are to successfully remain a “Nation of Immigrants” the government cannot see immigrants as mere customers, to be served in whatever languages they happen to speak. Government has the key role of helping immigrants becoming Americans, and in promoting the crucial step in that process: learning the English language. HB 5633 is consistent with this policy goal and with the values of the people of the state, and I respectfully urge this committee to favorably report it.

